

Nova et Vetera.

MODERN FAITH HEALING.

JOHANN JOSEPH GASSNER.

THE career of Johann Joseph Gassner, an eighteenth century faith healer, presents many points of similarity with that of Valentine Greatrakes, an account of whom was given in the JOURNAL of April 17th, 1909, p. 963. The chief point of difference between them is that whereas Greatrakes says he had "an impulse, or a strange persuasion in his own mind," of which he was not able to give any rational account, which very frequently suggested to him that there was bestowed on him the gift of curing the king's evil, Gassner treated disease frankly as a manifestation of Satanic agency. His name is probably now known to none but students of the history of spiritual healing, and an account of his "cures" may therefore be of some interest.

Gassner was born at Bratz, near Bludenz, on the frontier between Tyrol and Suabia, on August 20th, 1727. After studying at Innsbruck and Prague he became a priest, and in 1728 was appointed to the cure of Klösterl (? Klosters) in the diocese of Chur (Coire), in the Graubünden (Grisons). There he discharged his clerical duties to the entire satisfaction of his superiors and parishioners for some fifteen or sixteen years, when a rumour began to spread abroad that he cured all kinds of diseases by the laying on of hands without the use of any remedy. He was even said to have cured a patient (the Countess of Wolfegg) at a distance, by simply sending her his blessing. Soon patients began to flock from all parts to Klösterl. At first they came by fifties and sixties, but soon the number increased tenfold. At last, yielding to entreaties that were made to him to make his head quarters in some more accessible place, he got permission from his bishop to leave his parish for a time. He went successively to Wolfegg, Weingarten, Ravensburg, Dettingen, Kirchberg, Morsburg, and Constance, casting out devils and curing the sick. The Cardinal-Bishop of Constance, suspecting illusion or fraud, had Gassner examined by an official theologian. The healer made a perfectly orthodox profession of faith, and affirmed that he had never given himself out as a saint or a miracle worker. He protested that he only used the power conferred by ordination on all priests and even on simple exorcists to cast out in the name of Jesus Christ the devils who were, according to him, often the cause of disease. His discovery of his healing power was made on himself. He had long been troubled by severe headache and other infirmities, for which he could get no relief from the doctors of Innsbruck. He then sought for a remedy in medical treatises. At last suspecting that the cause of his illness might be supernatural, he had studied all the books on obsessions which he could get hold of, and had convinced himself, by the success of these exorcisms on himself as well as on others, that the diseases to which mankind is liable are of three kinds: There are some which are entirely natural, and therefore belong wholly to the domain of medicine; there are others, perhaps as numerous, entirely the work of the devil, which are caused by an "obsession," and can be cured by exorcism carried out by the invocation of the holy name of Jesus with faith by any priest whatever. Others, again, are caused by a "circumsession"; in these the diabolic invasion is complicated by a natural cause. The prelate, having made inquiries which convinced him of the soundness of Gassner's faith, of his submission to lawful authority, and of the purity of his morals, gave him permission to continue his exorcisms. This he accordingly did at Ellwang, Salzburg, and Ratisbon, from September, 1774, till the end of the following year. Crowds of patients flocked to him in ever-increasing numbers from all parts of Germany, Switzerland, and France. Among them were not only Catholics, but Protestants and Jews, and little children of 6 or 7 years of age. A notary or other public official kept a register of the interrogatories, the answers, and all the details of each case. This report was signed every day by the principal among the numerous spectators and by doctors, especially such as were Protestants, when any happened to be present.

The following was the mode of procedure. After one or two general questions addressed to the patient, Gassner, if

there seemed to be reason to believe that it was a case of obsession or circumsession, began by performing what he called a test exorcism, by summoning the devil to make the patient exhibit the symptoms of the disease which was his handiwork. If nothing extraordinary happened the disease was declared to be natural, and Gassner passed on to another patient. Most frequently, however, the convulsions or cries of the patient announced the presence of the evil spirit and his obedience to the voice of the exorcist. The Protestants said that the pretended signs and convulsions were merely performances arranged beforehand, or produced in people by the influence of the imagination when they were off their guard. To convince unbelievers Gassner later prolonged his test exorcisms during several hours, putting questions to ignorant people and children in Latin, commanding the devil to cause the most extreme and sudden disorder in the patient's pulse, ordering the fever to show itself only on one hand, to pass from one hand to the other, thence to the foot, and other parts of the body. The doctors who held the patient's wrist are said to have been amazed at these singular phenomena, which they could not explain.

The Duke of Würtemberg having expressed a wish to examine these wonders for himself, Gassner respectfully invited him to do so, and in order to banish every suspicion of fraud begged him to name the doctors who should accompany him, the patients on whom the rite should be performed, and those by whom it should be witnessed. All these conditions were complied with. The report of the proceedings, signed by the principal persons present, and having the signature and seal of the priest attached thereto, was taken to Paris during a visit paid to that city by the duke in 1777, and was shown to many persons.

Naturally there were many sceptics and not a few active opponents. Gassner's most formidable opponents among the Catholics were Father Sterzinger, a Theatine, and the celebrated physician, Anton von Haen of Vienna. The former, having gone from Munich to Ratisbon to be present at one of the exorcisms, saw nothing in it which he did not think could be explained as the effect of electricity, magnetism, or some yet unknown physical agency. Von Haen had never seen Gassner, but from reports received from various correspondents he was led to the conclusion that some of the effects could not be explained by natural causes; nevertheless, he held that they could not be described as miracles, as they tended to scandal rather than to edification. His conclusion, formulated in a treatise entitled *De Miraculis*, was that they should be regarded as works of the devil. Von Haen's reasoning was apparently more that of a theologian than of a physician.

As examples a few cases may be given. Of one of Gassner's early cures which brought him most into fame, Sterzinger gives the following account (p. 5):¹

Once he had the luck to make a certain Countess von Wolfegg, who had long been bedridden, get up, and that extended his fame as far as Mörsburg. At the supplication of many noble personages the Cardinal-Bishop of Constance was induced to allow the priest of Klösterl to come to the city where he held his court. In the month of July 1774 he entered Mörsburg amidst the cheering of the populace. But the air of that country did not agree with him, men of acute intelligence found his proceedings so foolish and harmful and so contrary to Christian principles, that His Eminence was persuaded to give the spiritual physician the *consilium abeundi*. I have by me a letter from a great landed proprietor of Mörsburg who had himself seen and noted all, from which I extract the following:

"July 30th, 1774.

"As many persons of rank as ordinary people were here for 10 days for the coming of the priest of Klösterl, whom they looked on as their saviour. The first cure took place in the convent, where the Canoness von Blarer presented herself to be cured of epilepsy. In the afternoon the healing performance took place in the Seminary, where the priest of Klösterl wrought his cures. First, there was the deaf Frau von Landsee from Ueberlugen. Secondly, there was the blind priest of Hettingen. Thirdly, there was the lame chaplain of Schönberg near Rothweil. Fourthly, there was a possessed person who firmly believed in Gassner."

After saying that Gassner's whole method of dealing with his patients seemed to him to savour of charlatanism and to consist in making the sick believe they were cured

¹ Die aufgedeckten Gassnerische Wunderkuren aus authentischen Urkunden belichtet, und durch Augenzeugen bewiesen. By Ferdinand Sterzinger. 1775.

when in reality they were not, the writer goes on to say:

The blind priest of Hettingen, in spite of prayers said aloud for spiritual assistance and in spite of the strong faith he had in the name of Jesus, did not recover his sight through Herr Gassner. The spiritual physician, it is true, took him to the window, and the patient, who had cataract, perceived a little light and could recognize the red colour of Herr von Sickingen's clothes and the star on the black robes of the Herr von Rothberg. Then a white sheet of paper was held before his eyes, and he said it was something black, etc. In a word, the good priest of Hettingen was not a pin better than he had been before.

The following passage is very significant:

Again the feet of the lame Chaplain of Schönberg were not relieved. It is true that through his frequent ejaculations of: "Non debet consentire Dolori, sed resistere fortiter in fide," Herr Gassner managed to get his patient to rise and go down to the lower town with Wildenmann, but he had to be led, and suffered at each step so much from the pain that he ground his teeth.

Elsewhere it is stated:

I have seen no case of real possession for Gassner to exorcise. The trick with an epileptic person was discovered by the court quarter-master; the exorcist, in the name of Jesus, frequently commanded the paroxysms of the little girl to cease; she finally knelt before him with her hands clasped together as if in prayer, then lay down slowly, but so carefully, that she did not displace her hood. The exorcist declared that this was a paroxysm. The court quarter-master contradicted this, and spoke to the girl, who answered him. The exorcist was put to shame, and soon dismissed his patient.

The following is an extract from a letter written by the Cardinal-Bishop of Chur on September 6th, 1774:

The first operation that I had the honour to see was on Fräulein von B—, who had a lame foot, and already the spiritual physician had spent the previous day over its cure. The healer sat on a chair, with the patient near him. He took her by the head, then by the hand, and commanded the evil thing to come forth immediately, in the name of Jesus. The convulsions came on little by little, and he stilled them in the name of Jesus. After that he produced different spasmodic movements and convulsions in the patient; these he made to last now a longer, now a shorter time, and then through the powerful word "Cesset" he made them disappear. After that the poor Fräulein for about an hour sprawled about, stretched and moved her limbs as he ordered her, till he told her to stand up on the lame foot and walk. The Fräulein took courage, stood up on the ground where she had always limped, and went step by step a little way about the room, but I remarked that she forced herself to do it. After this the exorcist blessed her on the forehead with the cross which he wore like a bishop, murmured something unintelligible, and left her. I saw no trace of anything spiritual during the whole of this operation; therefore it did not surprise me that the spiritual healer cured Fräulein von B—'s lame foot through arousing cramps and different spasmodic movements.

The prelate explains the cure as follows:

Through the *distensiones* the nerves were drawn out, all the limbs were convulsed, and the inspissated humours in the affected parts were made fluid through the violent movements, so that the lame foot could henceforth move itself, until the thickened humours should accumulate again. How can one call such an artificial way of healing a holy way? The name of Jesus in the mouth of the faith healer seemed to me only a pretence of sanctity.

A modern physician would probably say that the lameness was caused by hysterical contracture, which was cured by the faith of the patient. Another case quoted in this letter is that of a sturdy peasant who had St. Vitus's dance. He had already seen Gassner treat Fräulein von B—, and was prepared to do all that the healer commanded. Gassner spoke to him earnestly, laid his hands on his neck and forehead, and shook him. He was forthwith freed from his disease, and "began to dance and snap his fingers. He danced three times round the room, at which all the spectators and even the exorcist laughed." The narrator goes on:

After that the faith-healer allowed the exhausted patient to recover his breath, and then commanded, in the name of Jesus, that epilepsy should be displayed. Accordingly the patient threw himself on the ground, lumbered about on his hands and knees, rolled about here and there, and bellowed like an ox. At the repetition of the word "Cesset" the peasant became quiet and stood up.

Another case was that of Franz Thurnes, son of the upholsterer to the electoral Court of Munich. He was

an epileptic, and also subject to attacks of wind in the stomach:

After the necessary preparations, the healer made him swell his abdomen by three movements, until a powerful "Cesset" made it subside. I felt the stomach when it was swelled and also when it had subsided, but I cannot believe that this experiment expelled the devil with his circumsession. I still less believe that the spiritual performance had any medical efficacy. Then the healer commanded that the patient should be afflicted with epilepsy as he had had it. The patient became giddy, fell on the ground, and struck his head against an iron chest. After he had writhed about for a time, he stood up when ordered to, and the cramps attacked him. The patient breathed heavily, the cautious physician left him to recover, and appointed another hour in the morning to torture him once more.

Another case is that of a certain Count von S—, who had seen all the proceedings with impartial eyes. He asked the healer, "Could you cure me of gripes or colic, from which I often suffer, without touching?" "Why not?" said the healer; "if you only have a proper faith in the name of Jesus." "I have," answered the Count, "and I believe, as a good Christian, that Jesus as God is all-powerful." "You must also believe," continued the healer, "that your sickness comes from the devil." "As to that, I am indifferent," replied the prudent nobleman. The healer then commanded in the name of Jesus that the colic should appear, but it did not come. He commanded twice, and the exorcism had no effect. The healer got up from his seat, and was walking up to the count, when he was reminded that he ought only to remain seated; then he got rather angry, and in a voice that showed his temper he ordered, three times one after the other, that the colic should instantly appear. But it was of no use; the devil could not awake the stomach-ache without the touch of the priest. The healer availed himself of the only possible loophole, and said: "We can see, in this case, that the illness is natural." This incident took place in the house of the viceregent, where only six people were present. This experiment, says the narrator, furnishing a substantial reason for believing that there is a "secretum naturale" at the bottom of Gassner's cures.

According to this witness, Gassner, when asked if his "cures" were miracles, replied that they were only exorcisms. When it was pointed out to him that the Church had not instituted exorcism for the cure of the sick, and had always looked upon the cures of disease wrought by the Apostles in the name of Jesus as miracles, Gassner lost his temper and shouted his objector down.

The following account is interesting from its naïveté. It also shows that there was at least a strong suspicion of trickery, and that Gassner's operations were not regarded seriously by many of the witnesses.

I have as yet made no reference to Gassner's method of treating persons. The rôle which he played with people of this kind was so entertaining that it was a common saying at Ellwangen: "Let us go to the Gassner comedy." I went into the operating room one night at 9 o'clock with some other gentlemen and saw Gassner sitting by a table, upon which were two candles. Near it were two rows of seats for the nobility, and behind them was a space for the rest of the audience. At the side of the table stood the possessed and other infirm persons, and amongst them was Herr Riedmayr, a notorious exorcist from Munich, who had at his right side Magdalena Sönerin, the daughter of an artist of Munich, who was possessed. This young girl when she saw me, cried out, "Here comes our friend." I kept quiet, but she called me by name, and I said, "I know the speech of a wicked person; forbear from mentioning my name, or I will leave the assembly." Herr Gassner cried "Silence," and the evil spirit called me no more. I must say here how the girl had learnt to know me. Four years ago, when she was not yet 16, this person was brought before the exorcist as being possessed. I was told that a Capucin had expelled the devil from her, and that in his flight he had left behind his mark in the form of five indelible black scratches made by his claws on the white wall above the door. As I do not believe in anything unusual until I am convinced as to the facts, I went to the artist's house on April 25th, 1772, where I was conducted to see Lenerl, and the whole history, with all its circumstances, was related to me—how through a *maleficium* she was tormented by the devil, how he troubled her, and finally how her illness left her. I went into all the proofs with Lenerl . . . and found that the black marks were painted with Indian ink; the fraud was exposed, and Lenerl was put into the House of Correction, and examined, and as she stuck to her deceit, condemned to a year's work in the local Bridewell; when she returned to her parents it was perceived that she was not possessed, but hysterical. Then came the rumour of Herr Gassner's fame to Munich, how he had the power to cast out the devil from those possessed, and Lenerl

again became possessed: she had an epileptic fit on a couple of chairs on the grass-plot before the nuns' church, and therefore every one believed firmly that she was possessed; and she found some charitable people who gave her money to enable her to travel to Ellwangen.

This Magdalena Söluerin was the first with whom the priest of Klösterl began his comedy. . . . The exorcist asked: "What is your name?" "Lenerl." "How long have you been possessed?" "Six years." "Is there any one present who can affirm to the truth of this?" Herr Riedmayr, a secular priest of Munich, who had travelled to Ellwangen with this person, answered: "I give you my word as a priest that this creature has been possessed for six years, and what is still sadder she was confined three years ago in the House of Correction for it." "That is not right," said Gassner, beginning to hold forth, "poor people might disguise themselves as possessed persons in order to get alms, but not such persons as this; she is truly possessed, and whoever does not believe it, hurts her reputation, and commits a mortal sin." . . . The exorcist further asked: "How are you possessed?" "The devil has got into me with my food." [This would seem to show that the girl had in her own way anticipated certain modern theories as to the origin of disease.] After that the exorcist put several other questions to the pretended demoniac, and then by means of his mystic art, he aroused in her the hysterical illness to which she was subject; he let her lie about the ground in convulsions, and then quieted her. He also performed his universal experiment; he put the girl's right hand, with the fingers divided and stretched out on to the table, and cried out: "Let the hand become quite rigid."

A courageous gentleman, wishing to be convinced, put one finger after the other on it, and finally the whole hand. The exorcist did not like this; he grew sulky, took the girl's left arm, stretched it out, and commanded in a terrible voice: "Let this arm be as stiff as a bar of iron!" But this experiment was rendered ridiculous by the same gentleman, who bent her arm into an arch. The Count, with the object of investigating the state of demoniacal possession, wished to speak to her in French; but she answered: "I only understand German." The exorcist himself, desiring no more ridicule, took Magdalena Söluerin by the head, sent the devil into her right foot, dismissed her in peace, and appointed a time for her to come the next day. Then came on the scene another person believed to be possessed, an unmarried woman of about 24. The exorcist treated her as he treated all persons similarly afflicted; that is to say, he asked her some questions, allowed her to fall into the fits and convulsions with which such persons are afflicted, and then banished the illness. Another thing which struck the audience with amazement was his putting her into a dying condition, and she appeared, as she lay in the exorcist's arms, to be in the last agony. Two doctors felt her pulse, and found it to be that of a dying person. . . . The exorcist was so pleased with this experiment that he did not torture the woman further, but commanded the devil to go forth, opened her mouth, and said that the devil was gone. Some one, who stood behind my chair, said: "I see the evil spirit already hovering about." But this eccentric person was the only one who had the luck to see so rare a phenomenon. It was already half-past twelve at night, and I went to my lodgings.

One day of the "Gassner comedy" was enough for this witness, who made haste to leave the "bewitched town" of Ellwangen. It should be said here that all witnesses agree that Gassner took no fee for himself. But his "cures" brought custom not only to innkeepers but to apothecaries. One of the writers whom we have fished up from what Carlyle calls "foul Lethean quagmires,"¹ says the whole town of Ellwangen was overflowing with strangers from every province in Germany, and even from Poland and Italy. The apothecary sold a universal eye water, a common olive oil, a universal powder, and a medicinal tea. The oil and the powder had been blessed by Gassner. In one day the apothecary made out of these trifling things alone a profit of over 100 rix dollars. What happened at Ellwangen occurred later at Ratisbon. Speaking of the after-effects of Gassner's cures the same writer says:

Most (some say all) relapsed. Some, after undergoing the operations, died when they returned home, or became worse than they were before. I know towns from which 200 or 300 people journeyed to Herr Gassner, and there is not one of those patients who can say with truth: "I am well; he helped me." The thing in the long run had no lasting effect. But, on the contrary, I could name persons soon after their return home from being cured at Ellwangen—people who were half blind becoming totally blind, melancholics who went completely mad. Many, who had already been to Herr Gassner at Klösterl and Ellwangen, travelled to him a second time at Ratisbon. For a little time all went well, but soon afterwards they were the same as before.

Gassner defended himself in pamphlets, in which he maintained that his method of cure was expulsion of the devil.

¹ Politische Frage ob ein weislich regierender Landesfürst über die Gassnerischen Kuren ohne Nachtheil seiner Unterthanen noch länger gleichgültig sein kann 1775.

The epidemic of obsessions continued to spread to such an extent that the authorities took alarm. The Bishop of Constance and the Archbishops of Prague and Salzburg forbade Gassner to "practise" in their dioceses, and Joseph the Second, by an Imperial Decree, dated 1777, expelled him from Ratisbon. The Prince-Bishop of that city, who had named him his chaplain with the title of Ecclesiastical Councillor, permitted him for some time to continue his operations at Ellwangen, where he still was on October 1st, 1777. The force of public opinion, however, soon compelled him to send back Gassner to his work as a priest. The healer died, forgotten by the world, on April 4th, 1779.

From a study of the available accounts one gets the impression that Gassner acted in good faith. He may have suffered from a little spiritual exaltation in the display of the powers which he believed himself to possess. It is equally clear that the majority of cases in which he wrought "cures" were examples of pronounced hysteria, on which he operated by suggestion. It is easy to understand that such formulas as *Cesset illa debilitas! Modo adsit febris tantum in manu et brachio dextro! Cesset in ista manu et adeat ad sinistram!* and *Praecipio hoc in nomine Jesu*, pronounced in an authoritative voice, must have had a powerful effect on the mind of the credulous and superstitious.

A point which is of special interest to us in these days is that Gassner's method—the laying on of hands, accompanied by prayer and exhortation to faith—is exactly that of the spiritual healers of our own time. In particular, the words *Non debet consentire dolori sed resistere fortiter in fide* contain the very marrow of Christian Science.

APPEAL ON BEHALF OF MR. H. W. COX.

SIR WILLIAM TRELOAR, who was Lord Mayor of London in 1906-7, has made an appeal for a fund on behalf of Mr. H. W. Cox, who was one of the first manufacturers and perfectors of x-ray apparatus for medical use. Nine years ago Mr. Cox began to suffer from dermatitis, and five years ago the middle finger of his left hand was amputated. His condition since then seems steadily to have deteriorated; four years ago the face, mouth, and chin were severely affected; eleven months ago three fingers of the right hand were amputated, and last November it was found necessary to amputate the right arm. There is dermatitis also of the chest, and the left hand is withered. Mr. Cox is 46 years of age, has a wife who nurses him, and three sons, aged respectively 12, 14, and 16 years. He had to give up work six years ago, and the grant made to him from the Royal Bounty Fund was a lump sum of £200, not a pension as has been thought in some quarters.

Mr. Cox is a victim of science in its application to medicine and surgery, and his crippled condition and the pain which he suffers will, we are sure, appeal to the generosity of the medical profession as well as of the public.

Contributions may be sent to the Cox Fund, 69, Ludgate Hill, and cheques should be crossed London City and Midland Bank, Ludgate Hill.

British Medical Association.

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